

## 3.0

# Downtown Framework: Setting the Stage

The physical conditions of a downtown greatly affect the urban characteristics of a city. Based on the synthesis of alternative scenarios, the Downtown Plan establishes a framework for the comprehensive range of recommendations provided in Chapter 4.

*The best way to predict  
the future is to invent it.*





# Summary of Issues

The analysis of the current physical, socio-economic, governmental, and programmatic conditions of downtown Wilmington, in conjunction with the extensive input of interested stakeholders, reveal several key issues for this downtown Plan. These include:

**QUALITY OF LIFE PERCEPTIONS**

Downtown is perceived by some residents and property owners as unattractive, uninviting, and unsafe., primarily due to the prevalence of bars and nightclubs. These concerns are exacerbated by a perceived lack of regulatory enforcement relating to the supervision of alcoholic beverages, unruly behavior, disruptive noise, and the cleanup of trash and debris.

**POOR ORIENTATION TO THE RIVER**

The Cape Fear River is downtown’s single greatest asset, but it is not the central focus of downtown. In addition, portions of the waterfront are crowded, open space along the River is limited and east-west public connections to the River are weak.

**AN INCOMPLETE DOWNTOWN**

Downtown Wilmington has a charming pedestrian character and many positive features and attractions. But the development pattern of the downtown core has too many gaps of vacant parcels and empty buildings that diffuse the urban fabric.

**EXCESSIVE SURFACE PARKING**

Too much downtown land is used for surface parking, which is an inefficient use of urban resources, an unsightly interruption to the downtown experience, and an indication of an underperforming real estate market.

**NOT ENOUGH DOWNTOWN HOUSING**

There are not yet enough residents in the downtown core to make it a viable community. There is insufficient market demand for a full-service drug store, hardware store, or especially a grocery store.

**MISSING OPEN SPACES**

The lack of downtown parks and open space amenities has a critical impact on the urban environment. Without inviting recreation opportunities or public gathering places, the reasons for visiting or staying downtown are reduced for both local residents and tourists.

**LACK OF INVESTMENT AND FUNDING**

The private sector and the City are not investing the full resources necessary to enhance downtown. Private-sector development activity, public improvements, and a commitment to funding necessary changes are not apparent.

**REGULATORY CHALLENGES**

There are frequently adverse relationships between the City, local residents, and the private-sector development community in Wilmington. A city is best served when the regulatory environment includes appropriate incentives as well as punitive requirements, there is a clear understanding of performance expectations, and stakeholders work together for mutual benefit.

**URBAN DESIGN THREATS**

With a growing market for new downtown development, potential threats to the urban fabric will increase. Investors will desire higher-density buildings to offset land costs and citizens will fight for historic preservation to maintain a lower-density character and high-quality architecture.

**FEW YOUNG ADULTS**

Despite local educational opportunities and a good quality of life, Wilmington is exporting its bright and talented youth to other metropolitan areas. This “brain drain” of young adults moving elsewhere to live and start families occurs because there are not enough quality jobs and there is a lack of entertainment uses and family activities in Wilmington.



The key to a vibrant downtown is people.



A mix of uses creates 18 to 24-hour street vitality.



This mural helps enliven the street by defining an otherwise blank wall.

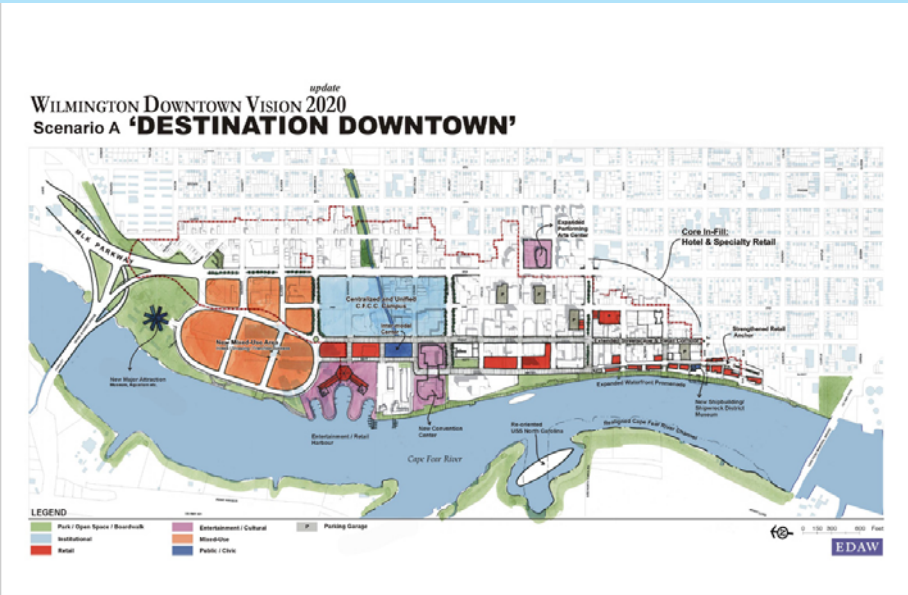


Public art like these sculptures on exhibit

## Alternative Scenarios

Three alternative scenarios were developed and presented to Wilmington citizens and stakeholders to facilitate a dialogue on the future of downtown. Each alternative had a slightly different land use emphasis and was oriented toward a slightly different market:

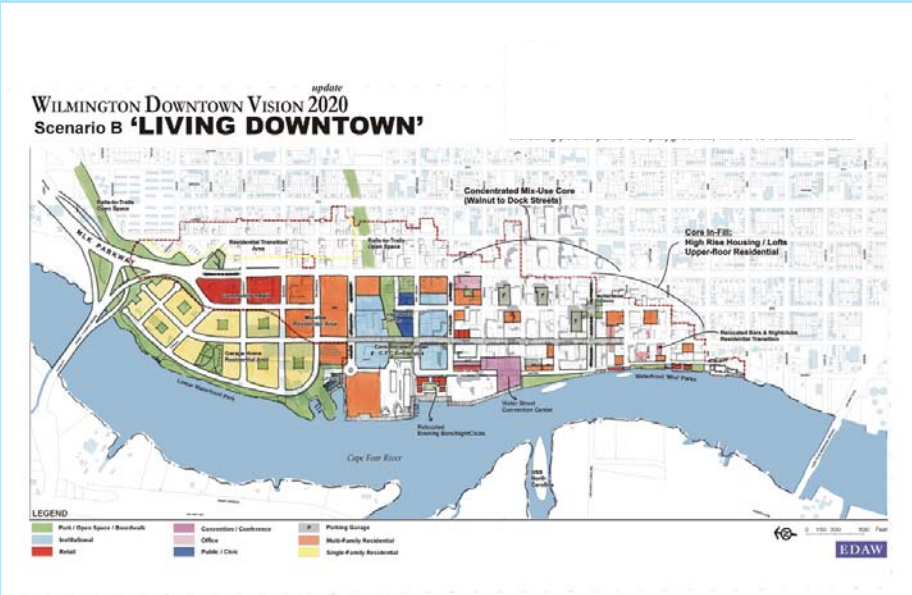
By providing options, the preferred elements were identified and prioritized. The resulting choices helped create an initial draft version of the Plan.



### Destination Downtown

To attract visitors and tourists from across the state and throughout the country with new major attractions and entertainment retail uses.

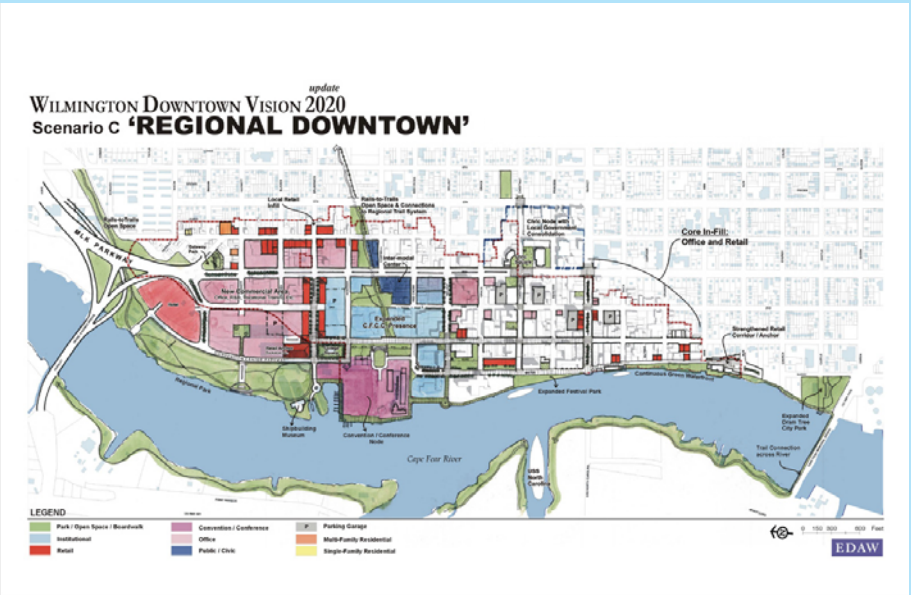
The intent is to use bold new facilities and promotions to make Wilmington's downtown synonymous with family-friendly festivals, cultural events, specialized shopping, and outdoor waterfront activities.



### Living Downtown

To attract an expanded market of new residents, especially artists, young professionals and "empty nesters."

The intent is to transform Wilmington's downtown into a desirable urban neighborhood with multiple housing types, community amenities, and a relocated nightlife district. Activities would be located at key points along the shoreline encouraging residents to use and interact with the riverfront. Public open spaces, including pocket parks and playgrounds, would serve residential areas.



### Regional Downtown

To attract local workers and shoppers from greater Wilmington on a regular basis with a traditional mix of commercial uses and regional amenities.

The intent is to make Wilmington's downtown the center of employment in the business and local government sectors, as well as a popular location for retail and family recreation activities for residents of New Hanover County. Cape Fear Community College would be strengthened as a regional commuter draw adjacent to downtown.

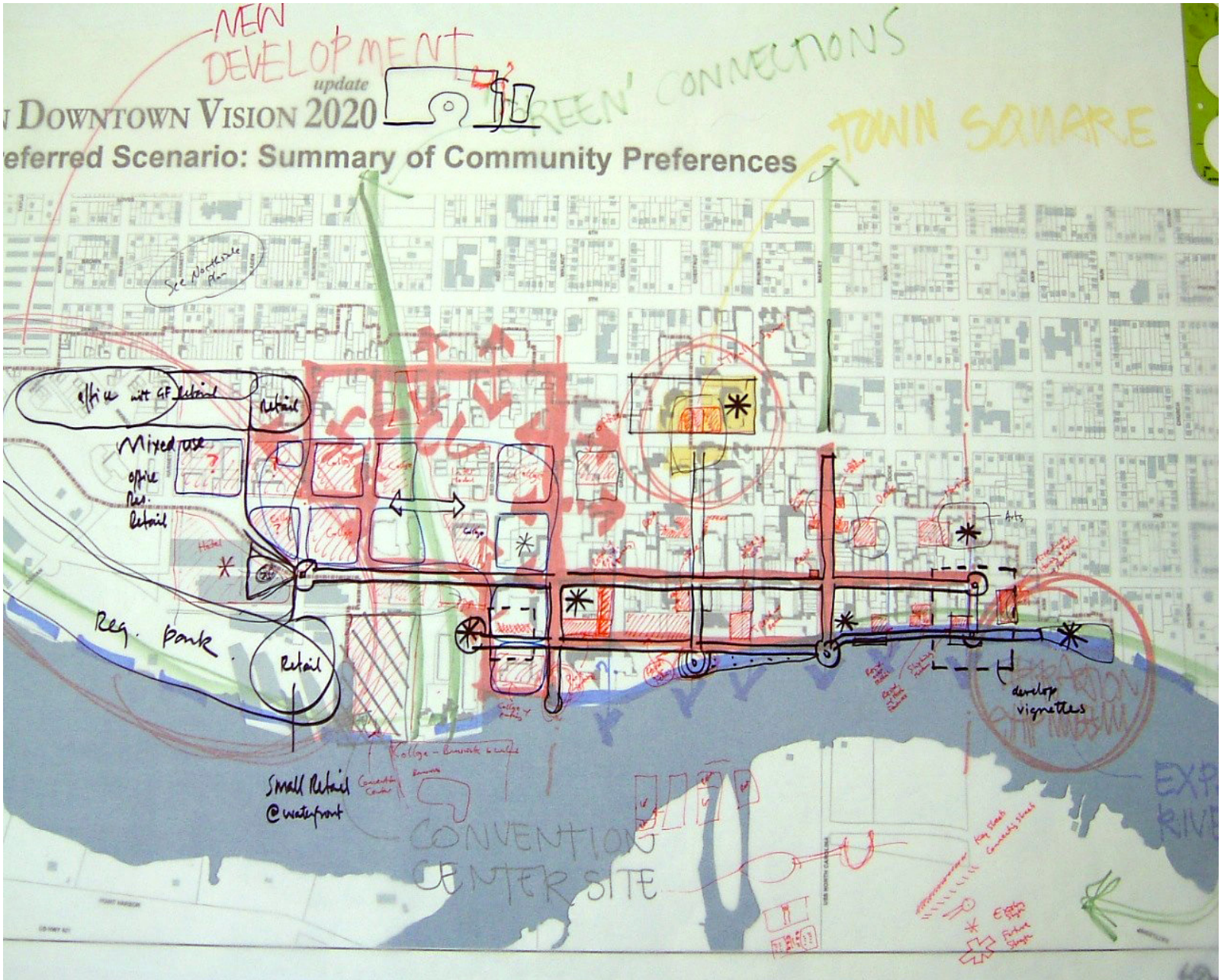


# Community Preferences

During the alternatives workshop, after full consideration of the three alternatives, the community's preferences were summarized into a Preferred Scenario. The Preferred Scenario synthesized several ideas from each of the three scenarios and served as a framework for developing the Wilmington Downtown Plan.

Based on public input, three primary ideas were incorporated into this Preferred Scenario:

- 1. provide more usable open space along the waterfront;
- 2. encourage more mixed-use residential and commercial uses, and include more cultural attractions; and
- 3. address a variety of current issues, including bars/nightclubs, the proposed convention center, and the quality of urban design.



Working diagram sketch developed with public interaction and feedback during community workshops.



# The Waterfront Downtown Plan

The Wilmington Downtown Vision 2020 Plan includes the following recommendations for physical elements:

- Increase the amount of open space downtown, especially at the waterfront, for parks varying in both size and uses (expanding Dram Tree Park, Festival park, and other smaller open spaces).

- Complete north-south Riverwalk connections along waterfront.
- Preserve east-west street corridor views to the River.
- Infill vacant land and parking lots with parks and residential and mixed-use development.
- Complete streetscape improvements along Front, Water, Chestnut, and Market Streets.

- Create a civic square at Thalian Hall.
- Expand Cape Fear Community College around a College Square park.
- Encourage a new mixed-use commercial area in the north waterfront area with a large regional park at Holmes Bridge.
- Create an Arts Promenade along Orange Street.

- Facilitate a new Maritime Museum and re-invent the existing Railroad Museum.
- Convert rails-to-trails open space along the former railroad corridor without precluding a multi-modal facility.
- Enhance a new green edge along the west side of the River to enhance pedestrian and bicyclist activity.





Measuring Progress

The success of the Waterfront Downtown plan can be measured by comparing progress toward quantifiable benchmark targets. Identified benchmark goals would thus serve as specific milestones for key downtown population growth and economic development data. Recommended benchmarks for 2020 (and 2010) include:

Component	Action	2020 Target
Downtown Population	Increase	3,000 new residents (1,000 by 2010)
Downtown Housing	Increase	1,500 new dwelling units (500 by 2010)
Downtown Employment	Increase	10,000 new jobs (5,000 by 2010)
Downtown Office Vacancy	Reduce	10% or less (12% by 2010)
Downtown Visitation	Increase	250,000 new visitors annually (100,000 by 2010)
Downtown Hospitality	Increase	200% more hotel rooms (100% by 2010)
Downtown Property	Increase	90% parcel utilization (75% by 2010)

